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Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres

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1

What might it mean to have or to hear a queer vocal timbre? Can such a concept be of any real use to us?

I attempt here to trace some steps toward exploring the exchange of queer sensations via timbres in vocal bodies. I do this in order to explore the implications for understanding listening, voicing, and embodying.

2

The beginnings of a queer-focused strand of musicology in the 1990s spearheaded the gradual creation of a small body of work exploring the nature of what queer musics might actually be, how these musics are generated, and how they are received by both queer and not-queer audiences. Some attention has been paid to the ways in which vocal register and 'kinds' of voice might signal readings and/or performances of queerness, with reference to Judith Butler's seminal ideas regarding the de-/re-constructability and performativity of gender, as well as to a poststructuralist performativity of identity as related to the Foucauldian fold of technologies of discipline. However, in her recent survey of scholarship in queer musicology, Rachel Lewis points out that the field is still in its infancy (2009). Despite certain key publications[1] and some fascinating explorations of what we might conceive of as queer performatives in sound, the field of enquiry regarding queer sound is still small.

These explorations have developed in tandem with a now diverse and vibrant queer studies literature and an ever-widening field of performance and cultural studies scholarship – one that explores the performance of queer in art and life, the doing of queer in culture, and the making of queer in social interaction. The notion of queerness has become ever more complex, with debate emerging around the question of whether queer can be queer when queer is now so *here*. Some suggest that queer as a category is increasingly irrelevant, or that it is too narrow or too exclusive to be meaningful in worlds of multiple and shifting identities (Lewis 2009: 45).

The vast majority of scholarship around queer performative embodiment focuses on visually manifested utterances, rather than auditory ones. In that context, this article maintains that queer vocal doings and queered auditory sensations are important to the understanding of the political dynamics of timbral exchange. The permission to create sensation in the social sphere, and thus fully manifest one's sensorial existence amongst that of others, might depend on our ability fully and sensually to sound and seek sound. Sexuality, among other qualities of human existence, underpins this sensuality.

3

This has something to do with timbre.

On a subjective level, timbre is a sensation in which we bathe. The cold, 'pure' electronic timbres of early Pet Shop Boys' tracks; the hot, rich timbre of the voice of Liza Minnelli; the woody, reedy timbre of my husband's

[1] Seminal texts in the area include: Peraino (2006), with which this article has some close affinities; Gill (1995); Brett et al. (2006); Fuller and Whitesell (2002); Whitely and Rycenga (2006).

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morning laugh; the timbral play of Debussy's orchestrations, made up of rich constellations of sensual sonic layering; the unique acoustic-electric, multiply peopled screamsongs of Diamanda Galás; the gravelly growl of Kiki (Justin Bond): these are a few timbral engagements that I maintain in the world – the voices and musics that caress and penetrate me.

The *Grove Dictionary of Music* describes timbre as:

> A term describing the tonal quality of a sound; a clarinet and an oboe sounding the same note at the same loudness are said to produce different timbres. Timbre is a more complex attribute than pitch or loudness, which can each be represented by a one-dimensional scale (high–low for pitch, loud–soft for loudness); the perception of timbre is a synthesis of several factors, and in computer-generated music considerable effort has been devoted to the creation and exploration of multi-dimensional timbral spaces. The frequency spectrum of a sound, and in particular the ways in which different partials grow in amplitude during the starting transient, are of great importance in determining the timbre. (accessed 24 March 2010)

With less of an attempt at scientific detachment, Olwage underscores the difficulty of accounting for this parameter of sound:

> Cornelia Fales has written most recently of the 'paradox of timbre' …; we hear it – of all sonic phenomena timbre carries the most information about a sound source and its location – but we have no complete language to describe it … When we get to timbre, then, it is only by getting beyond it. But mostly we never get there at all. (Olwage 2004: 204)

This avowed complexity of timbre and the processes underpinning its perception has something to do with what makes sounds distinguishable from one another. When we hear the 'tone' or 'colour' or 'quality' of sound, we hear something about it that makes it recognisable. A sound's frequency spectrum and the placement of partials are a scientific yet fairly reductionist way to conceive of timbre, for our *lived* experience of it tends to be extraordinarily complex. Describing timbre verbally is very difficult, and often we must resort to extended and complex metaphor in order to do so. Musicians can identify the timbre of one player from another, of one model of violin from another; before birth, babies can identify the qualities of a parent's voice, a component of which is timbre. Timbre is a necessary part of what we might call the idiosyncratic nature of sounds, our sensual relationship to them, and the people, animals, objects and phenomena that make them.

My concern in this article is the timbre of the human voice, and it is important to note that we distinguish between human voices with extraordinary ease, given their complexity. Of course, voices are made up of much more than timbre: they carry language, culture, accent, status or class, emotional content, and so on. However, all of these things contribute to timbre but are not wholly timbre; timbre is not wholly any of these things. Timbre carries connotations of touch through its relationship to the notion of texture. We can perhaps imagine timbre as a complex form of tissue or a touchable fabric. It is layered, multi-faceted and rich with complexity and information. That information must be felt to be processed.

When I am teaching, I often ask: 'Have you ever fallen in love with a voice … on the telephone … or at a party … or on the radio? Have you ever felt like touching someone romantically or sexually because of the quality of their voice? What makes up that quality? Why did your knees go weak on hearing that voice?'

4

Steven Connor proposes the existence of something he calls a vocalic body (Connor 2000: 35–43). This is how I understand that concept.

When we make vocal sound, we create a field of vibrations. We shake matter. We make matter buzz with the kind of ripple effect wave energy that we call sound. From our bodies, these waves move forth and journey through space and time. They act on, and interact with, matter.

As soon as we create a sound wave with our phonation apparatus, it moves out of us. It is, at least in a generative sense, over. But until it decays and is used up, the wave moves outward from us. Other humans may perceive that wave; indeed, they perceive a complex temporal sequence of waves. By the time it reaches them, it is completely 'gone' from its source of origin. The sequence was fabricated by a living body and carries a unique imprint of that body. Yet it is literally disembodied.

When the sound reaches the listener, they must infer, invent, an assumed body, linked to the voice. The listener is left to fabricate that body within their own. Maybe there is a visual representation of that body nearby. Maybe not, as in the case of yodelling, radio, or calling from afar. Yet vocal sound necessarily implies the existence of a body. We hear and feel a body: a peculiar sort of body; indeed, an archived body. But it is the vibration itself that touches us. There is the implication of a body and a representation of a body, but no flesh. It is a *vocalic* body.

5
This vocalic body is produced by an anatomy around the larynx that 'contains the highest ratio of nerve to muscle fibres of any organ in the body and is therefore "exquisitely responsive to intraorganismic changes"' (Holzman and Rousey cited in Connor 2000: 6).

6
It thus follows that the vocalic body is produced not only by the unique genetic capacities of each human (as modified by their environmental and cultural experience – what I will call the social body), but also by exactly what is taking place within that body. In other words, our social body is in a constant state of flux. It changes. Emotional responses, postures, work and play activities, desires, states of satiation, respiratory patterns, and so on, all transform, even if very subtly, the ways that our bodies metabolise, move, and pulse. These changes necessarily affect the voice of that individual because of the voice's exquisite responsivity.

7
Foucault's and Butler's understandings of gender and identity reveal how sexuality is formed by the combination of agency and desire, contained (or not) by the enabling or limiting tendencies of the social sphere. Within this, queer people seek other queer people, to meet some of their (queer) needs and desires. These spatialities are not usual. They require negotiation across and through straighter spaces, for we do not live in a queer world. The reaching is therefore unusual reaching.

8
Seeking is a form of reaching. It is an extension of the body toward.

9
To reach, one must feel a sense of desire for gratification. The desire for gratification seeks an erotic plenitude.

10
One reaches with one's arms, and ultimately one's fingertips. The physical act of reaching is one that is basic, bodily and instinctive. The reaching of babies is a form of language. They want to be picked up. Before that, they reach toward food and love with puckered lips. Adults also pucker their lips.

11
Adults also want to be picked up, or at least picked. They also want to pick up and pull. They want to be reached toward and to reach, amicably, amorously, and sexually.

12
Reaching implies, includes, and stretches toward touching the subject (not the object) of our desires. We cannot exchange with an object, only with another subject. And we must find subjects that we can reach toward and hope to care for.

13
Sound can be understood as a form of touch. Martin Welton produces a compelling argument for the interrelation of sound and touch, based on experiences of theatre in the dark. In the absence of vision, the ensemble of sensations, emotions, thrills, and excitements that he experienced felt more related to the sense of touch. The visual field being absent, we might say his haptic senses reached out to situate himself and his experiences. An emphasis emerged on the experience of performance rather than on its representation (Welton 2007: 146–55).

14
If sound can be understood to act very much like touch, and to exist on the haptic register, then vocal sound can be understood as a kind of intimate, human-generated touch. The vibratory fields that we create when sending our vocalic bodies out into the world touch others. They reach; further than our fingertips.

In this sense voice is a form of social touch that can activate reactions in bodies, literally, by vibrating them (Bonenfant 2004, 2006). Social, because it can reach out and touch multiplicities of bodies rather than just one or a few.

If we return to the concept of the vocalic body – that touch of vocal vibration – we can surmise that sound touches us, and that what makes this touch, at least in part, identifiable, associable with another subject, is its timbre.

15
Why timbre instead of grain?

Barthes' notion of the grain of the voice is useful, profound, and impassioned (Barthes 1977: 179–89). I read Barthes' concept as a search for an almost essentialist, vivid rootedness and depth in voice, a depth that creates meaning. However, I also read this kind of essence of vocal sound, rooted in the encounter between language and profound corporeality, as ambivalent and even hostile toward surfaces. Barthes derides the operatic voice as being too dramatic; he insists on voices that come from and reach to the deep. The fully engrained voice functions on the register of bone rather than on the register of skin.[2]

Why is the feeling of skin not a deep one? Is the skin not also a brain? Is it perhaps queer to think that the skin's desire for caress by voices with theatrical qualities can also produce a form of profound *jouissance*? Does hyperexpressive theatricality have to connote the superficial?

Timbre can penetrate, but it also must brush and caress the surface. Touch does not have to be deep or penetrating to be powerful. Touch can glide and rest and take off like a flittering butterfly. Focusing on timbre rather than grain grants a lightness to the touch of vocal sound; a mystery and undefinability that can also work on the (corporeally) superficial level. Touching at the outermost level requires delicate sensitivity and refinement, and elicits haptic sensitivity and response. The body of the touched subject is, perhaps, enticed to reach out by the surface qualities of timbre, by its exterior, yet no less dramatic, stimulation.

Envelopment can be as sensual and meaningful as piercing and driving toward the core. This timbral vibration is thus a form of reaching, of caressing, of vibration into a different quality of 'penetration' than deep Barthesian grain.

Differing penetration queers the exchange.

16
Individuality and the resonances of our gestures are carried in the vocalic bodies we emanate.

Our extremely responsive, vibrating vocal chords give form to these vocalic bodies.

We listen 'out' for (reaching toward) voices that we think will gratify us.

Through the din of the filled-up world of emanation we seek voices that caress us.

17
And so how exactly do we hear vocalic bodies? What filters do our systems of perception use in order to judge those vocalic bodies and decide which to reach toward?

I propose that queer listening involves

[2] The notion of skin-register and bone-register used here is inspired by Pavis 2001.

developing a certain virtuosity.

Queer is a doing, not a being. Even if the source of some versions of queerness lies in the existential ground of selfhood, and is thus rooted in biological imperatives, it is through doing queer and being identified and marked as queer that the queer become queer to themselves and to the world. Hence the consequence of the naming of queer, separating queer into 'other'.

Queer listening listens out for, reaches toward, the disoriented or differently oriented other.

So far, there are no majority queer cultures. Queer is always listening out through the static produced by not-queer emanations of vocalic bodies. Queer can like, love and enjoy those bodies in every way, but still needs to twist around and negotiate through them to find other queer. Queer needs to disorient, and to attune to and through that disorientation.

To find others in that full space, again, requires virtuosity – perhaps, a virtuosic development of the performance of giving attention. To find these others requires a certain kind of attunement to hearing beyond syntax. Indeed, since hearing is feeling touch, this act of finding requires attunement to the touch of the vocalic bodies that caress queer. Sometimes, one has to listen very carefully to find them.

Hearing – listening out for queer needs and desires – requires a sensitivity to certain qualities of timbre which I cannot name, at least in the languages I speak: only metaphor can describe them.

18

Thomas Csordas' theory of somatic modes of attention can help us explore how this might work in practice. Csordas argues that we create and maintain specific kinds of rehearsed and attuned capacities for paying attention to our own bodies, and from this learn to read our bodies for information about others (Csordas 1993: 135-56).

These capacities are situated within culture and also within our biology, straddling these two fields. They are linked to the many and diverse roles we play within our culturo-biological frameworks. We can develop a hypersensitivity to noticing fat in a fat-phobic culture, tonus in an athletic culture, and by extension, tone and timbre in a musical culture.

We also might develop a virtuosic listening out for certain qualities of touch.

19

I postulate that queered bodies seeking gratification must, by necessity, develop these kinds of virtuosities of listening.

Our extraordinarily responsive voices signal much about our state of being, and we read the voices of others to help us understand the states of their being. By paying refined attention to our own bodies, we can monitor in detail both the ways we reach out and touch and the ways that the vocalic bodies that envelope, massage and collide with us stimulate change. Since bodies are located within the doing of queer voices, queer listeners can perhaps catch some of the subtle variations in timbre that indicate a resonant 'identity' that wants to touch someone like us.

Here we arrive at a redefinition of listening. Listening becomes the act of paying intense somatic attention to the ways that our bodies engage with the sonic stimuli around them, in order to decide which emanators of vocal sound to gesture toward, which of these to want and to seek, and in which baths of sound to swim. These stimuli are not just sound. They are tactile. Bodies respond to touch and monitor its characteristics for signs of potential mutual caress and intersubjective interpenetration.

I think of my first encounters with specific artists' voices at different ages – the genderless voice of Klaus Nomi; the joyful burst of Lady Miss Kier; the husky wood-freesia of Anthony Hegarty and the marked, pushed, yet low baritone of Patrick Wolf – and of how I was instantly drawn to each of these sounds. I was gripped by a fascination that took place faster than any process of logical reasoning or conscious recognition could operate; I heard

them before seeing any image of them, but immediately felt I should grasp them and pull their precious tones toward me, exploring what these tones had to say. It was something like romance, something like love, and yet nothing like either of these. It was an instinct that these voices would somehow caress my membranes and nourish my own plenitude.

20

If queer, as non-normative, is created by the need of a culture to separate difference from normativity with a (negativising) label, then many terms used to describe identity suffer a similar fate.

If we can develop somatic modes of attention for potential vocal touch-gratification, then this must also be the case when that voice is perceived as menacing.

Who is allowed to sound and under what circumstances? Who is allowed to touch with timbre in ways that caress queerly or otherwise? Perhaps there are qualities of touch that are felt to menace the hegemony? Certainly, particular qualities of speech and action have that effect on power hierarchies, but what about timbre itself?

In his moving article 'The Class and Colour of Tone', Grant Olwage recounts the history of the attempted repression of native African vocal colours in South Africa. He traces the history of the invention of voice culture in Victorian Britain – a 'right' way to sing – designed to civilise the singing voices of the working classes. The movement spread across the UK and the British Empire, and came to be one of the forces at play in the imperial desire to remake and racialise Africans. Olwage recounts colonial commentators' remark on the 'ugly' tendencies in the Black voice: the use of the open vowel 'ahhh' and nasal vowel structures which were considered uncouth, a general impression of a roughness of tone, and 'shouting' instead of singing quietly – in choir singing of the time, one was supposed to sing gently and almost under the breath (Olwage 2004: 206–16). Interestingly, however, Olwage does not argue that the Black voice was a colonial construct, but rather, that colonial powers could not allow themselves to come into intercultural exchange with such voicing.

Might we understand such racism and these complex dynamics of oppression as an unwillingness to be touched by vocal bodies? Colonial white culture resisted the reality of the vocalic bodies emanated by the reaching native population. Rather than responding to, or even bypassing, the haptic vocalisation of the other, it might be more convenient to try to change the quality of that touch into something else, something that reaches out less and is less disturbing of the sensations linked to the idealised perfect order of domination. The caress of the vocalic bodies of those we oppress might activate feelings of warmth, sexual response, and even love. It is difficult to dominate and destroy the world of those one cares about. So they must be kept quiet.

Similarly, those invested in heteronormative power structures might really not want to feel queerness touching them. This affects our speaking and listening, our singing and our rapture. Queer voices have sometimes had to be hidden and subsumed in order to have a chance of reaching other queer bodies. However, as with the Black voice of native South Africans, it is striking that queer speaking and singing voices don't simply go away.

As queer studies transforms, and continues to broaden its focus to international and intercultural experiences of queerness, it will be important to see how the vocalic bodies that signal the queer caress can reach out to each other across, as well as within, highly contrasting cultures and languages. Vocal vocabularies and touches of sensuality will increasingly be exchanged, and a much more potent activism on behalf of those living in extremely queer-inimical power regimes will have to emerge. And we must listen out for and guard against the establishing of a queer imperialism with respect to disadvantaged classes of our own kind.

21

It is to our advantage to understand how voices touch us, recalibrating our understanding of how we listen to them.

The exchange of erotics inherent in queer vocal exchange provides us with only one window through which to examine this question. As we continue to think about vocal performance – about what we allow ourselves to listen to and to what we are attracted – we need to consider how to facilitate the diversity of timbres that might lead to gratification of the skin membrane, of the touched and touching self, for all. We need to think and act carefully, to touch each other and to listen outward for the touch that delights us.

Let us dance together in the unique sensualities of our identities and reach with them, toward.

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